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Sir Alexander Bustamante,
Jamaican Leader, Is Dead

By Wolfgang Saxon

Aug. 7, 1977

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Sir Alexander Bustamante, hero of Jamaica's island's first prime minister when it became independent, died yesterday at the age of 93, after a long illness.

The Jamaican Broadcasting Corporation interrupted its regular programming to announce that Sir Alexander had died at Irish Town Hospital with his wife, Gladys, at his bedside.



Sir Alexander was a powerful labor leader and a fiery, often flamboyant, politician who headed the newly independent government from 1962 to 1967, when he stepped down because of age and ill health. During the three decades before his retirement, he was one of the dominant figures in the Caribbean.


An imposing, white-haired man standing well over six feet tall, he first confronted the British colonial administration with an increasingly militant labor movement that bore his name. He then founded the Jamaica Labor Party, and after taking office started many ambitious reform programs to provide new schools, hospitals, roads and farmland for a population that lived largely in poverty amid the island's abundant resources.

Son of an Irish Planter


“Like Lincoln, I rose from nothing at all,” Sir Alexander liked to say, and it was an apt comparison even if many of the road stations along the way were left somewhat uncertain in his own telling in his biographies.

By all accounts, he was born Feb. 24, 1884, as William Alexander Clarke, the son of a poor Irish planter and a Jamaican mother of mostly Arawak Indian descent. One of 13 children, he was proud of what African blood had been added to the family on his mother's side, for he often said contemptuously of some Jamaican political foe: “He doesn't have a drop of Negro blood.”

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Largely unschooled, he was adopted by a Spaniard, Sir Alexander Bustamante, who gave him his surname and title. Sir Alexander, he later joined the Spanish Army and fought in the Riffs in Spanish Morocco.

He and his biographers also traced an adventure in New York serving as an inspector in the National Police and a New York company operating the local tramway system.

In the early 1920's, he came to New York and lived in a hospital in Harlem. In New York, he made enough money to return, in 1932, relatively wealthy.

One story was that he made his money with shrewd investments (luring the bleak Wall Street days of 1929). But Sir Alexander also told interviewers later that he owed his wealth to the Harlem numbers game.

Back in Jamaica, he established a loan business and soon began to take an active interest in labor union organization.

Strikes threw Jamaica into chaos in 1938, with riots and clashes spreading across the island. In this period he quickly

gained reputation as a larger-than-life organizer and as a reformer with a flair for inflammatory oratory.


The British authorities jailed him on sedition charges that were later dropped. Once out of jail he formed the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union and it soon became the island's largest labor organization.


Became Hero to Jamaicans

He was again interned by the British during World War II, but by then he had become a hero to the Jamaicans. In 1943, his party won control of the legislative assembly, defeating the People's National Party led by his cousin, Norman Washington Manley, the father of Jamaica's present Prime Minister, Michael Manley.

He served as Chief Minister from 1953, to 1955, when Queen Elizabeth knighted him for his service to Jamaica. Then, as leader of the opposition, he led the successful fight to take Jamaica out of the West Indies Federation because he felt that distant, poorer islands would dominate Jamaica, the grouping's largest, and most populous entity.

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He led independent Jamaica with vigor and remained undaunted by detractors who saw tendencies and a political demagogue.


He married the former Gladys Maud Longbr It was his second marriage.

Tribute Is Paid by Young


Special to The New York Times

KINGSTON, Jamaica, Aug. 6—Andrew Young, the United States delegate to the United Nations, now-on a visit to Jamaica, paid tribute today to Sir Alexander Bustamante as “one of Jamaica's founding fathers,” and said people in the United States would be joining Jamaica in taking note of his death.

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